**The Blame Game**

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# The Blame Game

by nike_of_samothrace

Summary

A storm splits up some of the 104th, and they have to navigate the elements, and something else, in order to stay alive.

or:

my version of that trope where there's a human hunting... humans. Levi had better find all his kids before someone else does.

Notes

This one I've had swept away for a while, waiting for its time to shine. Well it's time!!! This was sort of inspired by the whumptober prompt with Radio Nowhere by bruce springsteen. Yes I know there are no radios in snk. But is there anybody alive out there? We will find out! I have also realised that I really like using the outdoors as settings. Conflict with the elements is just as good to me as whump. I have a type, I guess. Enjoy :)

p.s. I did a looot of research on old card games for this one, the game they're playing is real and one of the oldest! Originating in europe, so I'm headcanoning it in the snk universe. and I just really like it when they all play cards together. it's serene? enjoyyy

See the end of the work for more notes

It started with Jean and Eren, like several problems often did. They were the ones arguing over who got the last good pair of training equipment, and who would have the damaged pair, thus being forced to sit out.

Or, if it went even deeper, it was Connie's fault, since he was the one who was supposed to oversee the equipment before packing it to bring to the training grounds. Which is ironic, because he didn't have to deal with any of the aftermath this would bring.

Of course, fingers could also be pointed to the soldier who put broken equipment back into storage without reporting it. The point was, it was fruitless to blame anybody, because what happened was ultimately the culmination of several tiny mistakes and miscommunications. It could have happened to anybody.

"I think I should have it," Eren challenged, tightening his grip on the last piece of good equipment. "I'm better with ODM gear. That way it wouldn't go to waste."

Jean fumed. "Even if what you just said was true, Jaeger, it would make more sense to let me have it so I could improve!"

"Fine," Eren said, annoyance flying from his face and being replaced with a pacifying smile. "I admit it. You're better at it than me. Now give me the gear!"

"No!"

Armin, Historia and Sasha witnessed the debate escalate, until Armin spoke up. "Should we do something?"

The only reason this had fallen into their hands was because there was no superior around- they were preparing for the training trip into the mountains. Mikasa was already training, and had been for an hour, waking up earlier than the rest of her squadmates, meaning she wasn't there to diffuse the fight. Connie was off giving the report to his superiors about what was packed so far on the former cadet's end, leaving the three soldiers to try and deal with the quarrelling soldiers on their own.

"Oi!" Sasha yelled, gaining attention of the two boys. "How about we bring it to a vote?"

Heads nodded, and Armin, Historia and Sasha huddled together away from Eren and Jean.

"I say Jean," Armin muttered. "Eren has his titan. Jean doesn't have another weapon to utilise or practice. Plus, he has good leadership skills that he could make even better."

"Eren," Historia immediately quipped. "Jean has more skills without the gear."

Sasha nodded and looked at Historia. "I also think Eren," she voted, sealing the deal. "He's more of a challenge to go against in training. It wouldn't be as fun if he sat out. Jean can practise leadership from the ground, right?"

The three stood back from their huddle, with Armin looking less confident than Historia and Sasha.

"Okay," the blonde announced, "We choose Eren, two to one."

"Sorry, Jean," Armin murmured.

"Bullshit," Jean cursed. As Eren raised a brow at his adversary, Jean took a deep breath and let go of the working equipment. Eren took it in both hands, looking rather satisfied, until Jean brought an uppercut to the titan shifter's jaw.

"Son of a bitch!" Eren yelped, stumbling back and hitting the wall, the equipment sliding out of his hands and to the floor. Jean stood his ground, staring Eren in the eyes, waiting for him to retaliate.

"Eren," Armin cautioned, but his friend paid no attention. After moving his jaw back and forth, he squared up Jean, and barrelled toward his waist, slamming the taller boy into the table that the damaged ODM gear sat on.

Roaring at the pain in his back that he knew would soon become a nasty bruise, Jean reached behind him, grabbed hold of the wire from the damaged gear, and quickly spun it fast around Eren, pinning his arms to his sides.

"What the hell!" Eren exclaimed at the sudden escalation in the fight. Historia was the first to jump forwards and stop the spat- she took Jean's arm and twisted it behind his back, causing him to yelp and let go of the gear. The domino effect caused the cord to retract around Eren, with the sharp end getting caught in the rough cloth of his shirt. The force of the retraction pulled the gear off the edge of the table, and it clattered onto the ground.

Sasha was on Historia in a matter of seconds. "Y’er gonna break his arm!"

Eren was trying to empty the air out of his lungs to stop the cord from tightening around his waist and arms, while Armin ran to assist him.

"Don't move," the smaller boy told his friend, taking a blade from the damaged equipment and carefully sliding it through the wires, sawing through Eren's bonds. Once he was free, the red marks left behind on the skin of his arms began to steam, and Eren leaped at Jean, who held his own arm in pain.

Armin looked between Eren and Jean, and Historia and Sasha, the latter who were on the ground trying to stop each other from standing, and the former, who were about to make contact with each other's fists once again.

Dropping the blade, Armin reached for Eren's shirt collar, pulling him out of reach of Jean, and did his best to shove him between Historia and Sasha. Unfortunately, Jean was already mid-swing, and his knuckles collided with the side of Armin's cheek, causing the peacemaker to join his three friends on the floor.

"Shit," Jean uttered, as Eren's eyes blazed fury.

"Jean!" Historia shouted, surprised, from the ground, crawling out of Sasha's grasp. The huntress then changed priorities to lie on top of Eren, who wanted nothing more than to give Jean two matching black eyes. Armin leaned against the wall, looking dazed, and Historia reached for the damaged gear, giving Jean a dangerous look that he hadn't even seen when sparring in training. Before she could even take a single step, though, the door to the room was swung open, and an angry-looking Captain Levi stood in the frame looking fairly pissed off.

At once, everybody froze, and what was left of the gear fell out of Historia's hands and landed with a thump on the floor. Armin's face filled with dread at the sight of his superior. Sasha looked up from her place atop Eren, who had stopped squirming beneath her, and all the blood in Jean's body froze.

"I leave you alone," Levi said in a near whisper, "for *ten* minutes."

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"Mikasa and Connie are leaving today with Hange to set up the training site," Levi announced. "You dunderheads aren't going with them. You'll spend the day cleaning the building from top to bottom. I want to arrive before dark, so we'll leave at two-thirty, and if you're not done by then, you'll be running next to the wagon instead of sitting in it. Understand?"

Five solemn heads nodded before their Captain, and then shuffled into their base to retrieve the cleaning supplies.

“This sucks,” Eren huffed.

“It wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for a certain *somebody*,” Jean hissed.

“Of course you’re too stupid to see how this is your fault.”

“I’ll show you something that’s about to be my fault!”

Armin stepped in between the two feuding soldiers. “Can we not do this again? Can we be civil? I don’t want to run next to the wagon!”

“It would be nice if we didn’t have to deal with you to fighting all the time,” Sasha huffed. “Look where it got us. Connie and Mikasa don’t have to clean, but here we are.”

“Technically, they’re still doing work,” Jean pointed out. “Just different work. Setting up the training camp grounds.”

“Yeah,” Sasha grumbled. “And by the time we get there, they’ll have eaten supper already. And sliced through all the fake titans.”

Eren held back a smirk. “For Jean’s sake, I hope not.”

Jean’s eyes shot daggers towards Eren, but physically, he contained himself as the group spent the late morning and early afternoon cleaning. At two, the five exhausted soldiers reported to Levi, telling him of their job well done, and asking to be excused for lunch.

“Lunch will be on the go,” Levi said. “The wind has been picking up. Look up at the sky, brats. It’s purple in the north. We’ll be leaving now to beat the shitty weather.”

“Nooo,” Sasha groaned. “That means no home-cooked meal!”

Jean put a hand on her shoulder. “You’ll have to make do with ration bars and bread.”

Sasha begrudgingly trudged into the wagon as Armin and Historia took the initiative to set up the tarp for the top in the face of the impending storm. “I want to die.”

Eren brushed past Jean, who stared at Sasha tiredly. “Her priorities are fucked.”

For once, Jean agreed with his nemesis.

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Levi sat up front, closer to the horses, since he was really the only one who knew the trail by heart. Unfortunately, the wagon canvas didn’t reach his seat, so he went from not looking forward to this ride at all to wishing a hail stone would knock him clean off his seat when he surveyed the cloudy sky once again. They were heading west, so they were going to end up in the path of the billowing purple clouds sooner or later, and when they did, Levi would be getting soaked.

He sighed and put up his cloak hood.

Sasha hadn’t moved from her place in the back of the wagon except to reluctantly take a ration bar from the supplies, and had resorted to covering herself with a wad of blankets. Armin studied her from next to Eren against the wall, and decided that he couldn’t blame her. The air had gotten considerably colder.

Jean and Historia sat from across them, and once the wagon started on its way, it was five minutes before anybody mustered up the energy to say a word.

“Someone close the flaps,” Sasha yawned.

Armin responded with an even bigger yawn. “For a quarter of your rations.”

A middle finger poked out of the heap of blankets.

“For fuck’s sake,” Jean sighed, reaching towards the strings on the canvas and tying them together. “It’s getting cold.”

And as if he had summoned the clouds to condensate, the first patters of rain hit the top of the tarp, creating a soft echoing as it became steady. It was a nice break from the silence, which had everybody re-evaluating their earlier actions that had made them skip the trip with Hange. And as if Armin could read the minds of his comrades, he shuffled through his pack for a moment, before pulling out a deck of cards, and silently dealt them out to Eren, Historia and Jean. Sasha had fallen asleep, and at the mercy of her friends, was left to her own devices. Sleep, she had discovered long ago, was a foolproof way to evade hunger.

A common bump in the path would result in the cards sliding along the wood which, despite the rain outside, remained dry. The four huddled in their cloaks for warmth, even though at first, Jean and Eren tried to each outdo each other by not putting it on. Eventually, Armin and Historia both cracked down on their stupidity, and a silent agreement was made that the cloaks would be worn.

“Raise to seven,” Jean said, eyeing Eren specifically in the increasingly dim light.

Eren looked at Historia, who, after a moment of focus, wiggled her ear. Eren flared his nostrils back to her. “Raise to ten.”

Armin sighed, and blinked twice at Jean, who just shrugged. “We accept.”

In the front, Levi shook his head at the teens in the back. Accepting a raise to ten. What was Kirstein, a fool?

Focusing on the road ahead, Levi practiced care as to not speed to the point of the wagon wobbling. They were coming up to the ravine section of the forest, which meant careful driving.

A moment later, from the back, Eren yelled, “Fuck!” as the sound of a high five followed, presumably not from the titan-shifter.

The path had become more and more overgrown, and the layer of mud on the ground had now officially covered up the wagon wheel tracks made from Hange’s wagon this morning. As they climbed up the side of a slippery section of the ravine, Levi held on tighter to the bridle.

“Consider yourself trumped,” Historia told Jean and Armin, laying down a six of spades. “Work on your bluffing, Jean.”

Jean frowned. “My *bluffing* is impeccable.”

Thunder rumbled outside, distantly, as if to agree with him.

“Raise to seven,” Jean said at the beginning of the next round.

“Raise to ten!” Eren said, not bothering to check with Historia.

As the play began, Jean played a seven of spades. Historia groaned. “Way to go, Eren.”

Eren raised a brow, and at his turn, slapped down a Jack of spades. “Karnöffel!”

Sasha stirred at the commotion that followed, but didn’t wake up. Levi rolled his eyes from the front, frowning as he could expect an incoming argument, specifically from Jean and Eren.

*Arrive before dark*, Levi thought, mocking his on words in his head. *Hmmph*. The sky was already a shadowy shade of greys and indigos. The sun, it seemed, had abandoned him.

Stupid sky. Stupid brats for making him punish them. Stupid him for deciding to punish them. He supposed that it was him who landed them in their current predicament. Stupid-

Levi was jerked to the side of the front wagon seat.

*Stupid horse!*

In chorus with another echo of thunder, gravity had abandoned one side of the wagon as the vehicle tipped left, towards the ravine. In a flash, he grabbed for the rein, and heard the horse whinny as they both fell around different sides of a thick tree.

The horse was the lucky one. It was able to regain its footing on the edge of the ravine while Levi held onto the reins, knuckles white. With his feet against the tree, he was able to climb upwards on the rein until reaching flat ground.

Levi searched the area for any of his squad, but the only being in sight was the horse.

“You idiot,” he said, unsure if it was meant for the horse or himself. He had five kids to find.

He hadn’t checked below the ravine yet. He almost didn’t want to look.

“Captain?”

Levi spun around at the sound of Sasha, who rose above the edge of the ravine and took a few steps away from the edge and onto the road. Besides some twigs and leaves in her ponytail, and the exhaustion clinging to her eyes, she looked all right.

“Blouse,” he acknowledged, caught off guard by the surprise. He wasn’t thinking clearly- if Sasha was okay, the rest of his squad was likely to climb back up the ravine themselves.

Sasha caught where Levi was looking towards the ravine, and sedates the thought. “I… sir, I didn’t see anyone. I didn’t really look, but… I don’t think no one’s down there.”

Then, Sasha dropped to one knee. “And I hit my head. I just wanna sit, can I?”

Levi was nodding before his mouth caught up to him. “Yes. Sit. How far down did you fall?”

“At least a few metres,” Sasha said, moving to sit under the tree that Levi and the horse were under, back resting against the trunk. “I fell onto a rock. It took me a minute to wake up, and I didn’t really look around me, but I didn’t see anyone so I climbed. Everybody might still be down there.”

Levi swallowed down the dread that was building in his stomach. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Stay with the horse.”

Levi crossed the road back to the side of the ravine. The main road continued on a slight downhill disappearing to the left. It was a lot farther than going straight down the ravine, but it would eventually come out at the bottom of the chasm.

There were imprints from the cart's wheels on the edge of the ravine before disappearing over the steep slope. Farther down, there were some shreds of white canvas that hung on askew tree branches. Playing cards littered the mud. The rain was a little lighter here, thanks to the tree canopy. The downside of that was how much darker the ravine got because of it. Levi couldn't make out the bottom.

*Shit*. He had to go back to Sasha. He couldn't leave her for long.

Just as soon as he turned, Levi could have sworn he'd heard a bush rustle. But spinning around to check brought no results. There was nothing but the stillness of nature.

Maybe he'd made it up.

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Water trickled close to Armin's ears. The bottom of his head was wet. And when he opened his eyes, he stared through the canopy at the rainy sky.

He sat up, despite his body begging him not to.

Walls. Just a minute ago, they were on the wagon. Now here Armin stood, his backside soaking wet, in the middle of a small rocky stream. That explained the bubbling water he'd heard. He gave his head a shake- he could feel water in his ears.

"Watch it!" Jean said, shielding his face with an arm. The other pushed him upright on the ground. "Disgusting."

"Jean? What happened?"

Jean's face was unbelievably pissed off at the fact that he sat at the bottom of a ravine. "The wagon tipped, obviously. And it's fucking raining."

Jean was a sight for sore eyes, but so was Armin. The blond had numerous rips in his shirt and slacks from the tumble down, and he could feel that he'd skinned his knees. Not to mention that his hair was sopping wet.

"Let's get out of the rain," Armin suggested, offering Jean a hand.

"No," his friend refused.

Armin frowned. "No? Jean, we kind of have to find the others."

"I *can't*," Jean pressed, pain seething behind his voice, and Armin began to understand. "My ankle really- really got a number done on it."

Jean's boot was covering his foot, but that was when Armin noticed the way that Jean sat, with his one foot sprawled in front of him like he was ready for it to be cut off. There was no blood, which was good, considering the fact that they had each rolled down a ravine so large that the top was nearly out of sight from where they stood. Well… where *Armin* stood.

They needed to go, to get back to the top, but Jean was in no position to climb. Dread filled Armin's chest.

There were three options. One, don't move and wait for help. But how were they supposed to know that anyone was even coming, that the rest of the group was okay? Two, they could both try to climb out, and risk Jean screwing with his foot, perhaps so much that he'd never walk again. Or three, Armin could leave Jean, and try to find help himself.

Option two didn't sound all that great, and option one made him rather anxious.

"We should stay around here," Armin declared. "Levi will come. We just need to wait."

"I'm not going anywhere," Jean mumbled.

The rain picked up. *Shelter*. That would be best, because the current conditions didn't favour them all that much. But, shelter required moving, which wasn't an option for Jean.

"I'm not going to go far," Armin decided, making the executive decision. "I'll be back soon. But I think we should look for some kind of shelter."

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*Some kind of shelter* turned out to be a ripped piece of canvas from the wagon. It was the only debris that Armin could find from the fall, proving how large the ravine that had swallowed them whole was.

He had to untangle it from the branch that it met its unfortunate fate on. It was a bit up the ravine, but not to the point that it was too steep to climb, even for someone as uncoordinated as Armin. Besides, he may have to practice his climbing if he and Jean were going to get out of there.

On making his way back to Jean, Armin had to cross the same spring that he had found himself in after the fall. It would just take one big step, but Armin paused in his tracks when he saw the shape of a footprint in the mud on the bank.

"Armin?" Jean called from where he sat. "What is it?"

The footprint was huge. Bigger than his foot, and bigger than anyone's feet on the squad.

"Nothing," Armin replied, keeping his voice favourably low. Only when returning to Jean did he reveal what he really saw, practically under his breath.

"Are you sure Eren doesn't just have humongous feet?" Jean commented, not as freaked out as Armin, but still speaking quietly for the blond's peace of mind.

"Positive," Armin confirmed. "Do you want to stay here to put this tarp up, or find somewhere less out in the open?"

Jean grimaced. "I really don't feel like moving."

Armin nodded. "So we stay."

Four large branches and some knot tying later, there existed a four-post tent that supplied a shelter from the rain big enough for two people. The ground was still wet from the rain, but Armin would take what he could get. They did it all as quietly as possible, because they were *not* alone in these woods.

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“I feel like we’ve been walking in circles,” Historia huffed, side by side with Eren. “That tree looks familiar.”

It was a strangely shaped tree, with some of the bark stripped off the middle.

“What else are we supposed to do, then?” Eren asked hopelessly.

Historia shrugged. “Scream?”

“*Captain!*” Eren hollered, his words being swallowed by the forest. When there was no response, he cocked his head at Historia. “See?”

Historia pulled her arms tight around her chest. “I wish Sasha was here.”

Eren sighed. Historia was right- they were going in circles. Neither of them had the navigational prowess of Sasha.

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“Captain!” Sasha shouted. “C’mere!”

Levi jogged up the road from where he was searching the ravine’s edge. “What is it?”

Sasha was pointing at a spot at the top of the ravine where grass and clover failed to grow. The soil was packed down, indicating a trail. “There’s a path here, sir. Maybe the others found it.”

Levi peeked at the path for himself. It sure looked like one, especially since it descended into the ravine at less of a steep slope. There were small trees and roots in the ground that could act as handles on the way down.

Levi scanned Sasha who, other than the tired look on her face, was standing tall despite the hit she had taken to the head. “Are you good to go down there?”

Sasha gave a small nod. “Think so. But maybe you should go first.”

Levi wasted no time, and crouched down, beginning the climb. There were points where he almost lost his footing to loose soil or rocks, but he made it to the bottom unscathed. Sasha was close behind, except when she was close to the bottom, she elected to slide the rest of the way.

Levi *tch*ed at the move. Sasha had mud splattered on her lower legs from it. Levi stared at the dirt underneath his nails. His own hands were no better.

Sasha took the lead. There were some points where Levi could have sworn the trail disappeared, but the huntress was good at using her instincts and determining where to follow. The path got rockier and rockier, and at one point, they crossed a small stream.

Levi bowed to run his hands through the clear water that was picking up from the rainfall. “If we don’t find them soon,” he said, “we should follow this stream. If they’re smart, they’d be near water.”

After hearing no response from Sasha, Levi turned to look at her, but she was nowhere in sight.

“Blouse!”

Just as quickly as she disappeared, Sasha emerged from between two rocks just off the path. “Sorry, sir. But you might want to check this out.”

Levi’s brow narrowed at Sasha’s mysteriousness, but he approached the rocks. The two giant stones were leaning in on each other, creating a cavern that only got deeper.

Sasha waved her hand close to where she last saw Levi once darkness overwhelmed them both. Feeling his sleeve, she grabbed the fabric, not wanting to get lost.
“How big is this place?”

Levi kept walking slowly, watching his step. “Not sure.”

Then, his foot bumped into something wooden. A table leg, he determined, feeling where it touched the ground. He followed it up with his hand until feeling the top of the table. There were some pieces of metal spilling out of a pouch, and they felt familiar to Levi in the cavern devoid of light.

Then, it dawned on him.

“Out,” Levi said, pushing Sasha towards the way they came, and towards the small bit of light that streamed in. Levi almost tripped on something metal- *chains*, he thought- so he kicked them out of the way.

Sasha didn’t question why they were moving so fast. She trusted her captain.

In the muted daylight from the rain clouds, Levi held his hand out to display his findings. There were multiple pieces of stamped metal, the kind of tags that had soldiers’ numbers for IDing.

“What are…”

Sasha didn’t finish her sentence, as the realization dawned on her as well. Soldiers didn’t lose their tags unless they were *dead*. What were these? Trophies?

“These don’t simply get lost,” Levi said, a sudden uncomfortable feeling rising in his chest. “We need to find the others and get out of here before whoever took these does.”

“But I’ve got this,” Sasha said, shrugging a rifle off her shoulder.

Levi’s eyes widened. “From inside?”

Sasha nodded. “I mean, yeah. Where else?”

“Cut the sass,” Levi said. “Have that ready at a moment’s notice. We don’t know where this guy is.”

“Or guy*s*,” Sasha amended. Then, “sorry.”

Levi ignored the correction. “Let’s follow the stream. Stay quiet.”

*Walls*, he hoped these brats were somewhere safe and out of the rain, but that was too much to ask for. Levi’s luck never ran long.

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“Th-this s-*sucks*,” Eren grumbled, teeth chattering. “Why couldn’t we have gotten lost in the woods on a *nice* day?”

Historia was shivering just as much as the pair trekked through the forest.

“There’s a rock,” Historia said, pointing straight ahead at an anomaly on the forest ground. “Let’s see if there’s cover.”

There was more than cover. One rock leaned over another, creating a triangular entrance into a pitch black cavern.

Eren and Historia exchanged a glance. *In*.

There shouldn’t have been bears in this part of the forest, so the two entered without care for the possibility of anything being inside.

“Historia, can you grab my hand? Just so we don’t get lost?”

“I can’t see anything, it’s too dark-*”*

Historia was cut off when her foot met something hard and metal that rattled when they moved. Chains.

“Historia, where are you?”

“Eren, I *fell*, on these-”

A light began to fill the air. It was dim at first, coming through the entrance, but soon it glowed with half the cave, exposing Eren, Historia, and the chains at her feet. And, on the corner of a table, a skull.

Eren offered his hand to help Historia up, and they both met the eyes of the source of the light.

“Hello, children.”

With his shaky hold on the lantern, Eren and Historia could see this man thoroughly. They could see the rips and tears in his muddied clothing that hung off his body. His beard, which was long and frazzled, not having seen a brush in ages.

A slow smile began to creep across his face. His teeth were jaundice yellow. His eyes were hungry.

“We didn’t mean to intrude.” Historia’s voice wavered as she spoke.

“We’ll be leaving,” Eren added, longing for when their biggest problem was the weather.

The man threw up his hands placatingly. “No! Why leave so soon? It’s been forever since I’ve had-” He looked at something past Eren and Historia. “*Visitors*.”

“Our captain is about to come and get us,” Historia lied. “He’ll be concerned if we aren’t outside.”

Historia tried to take a step forward, but the man threw up a hand. “No! You stay!”

Historia ignored him, slipping by, and was forced back by the swing of the lantern. The flame blew out in a flash, and the three of them were plunged into darkness, with hell about to break loose.

They had to get out of here, and ditch this guy. They had to find Levi. Find Levi, and the rest would come easy.

But nothing ever came easy inside the walls.

Historia stumbled into Eren, sending him back as the man swung the lantern into thin air. Historia grabbed whatever she could grasp of Eren- his sleeve- and made for the exit, where a sliver of sunlight still made it in to the cave.

They made it two steps before the man dove in front of them both, knocking Historia to the ground. The entrance was left open for Eren to take to escape. To run and find somebody to help. Only one of them needed to leave.

Yet, realistically? Historia wouldn’t survive if she stayed here, judging by the skull. The chains. But Eren?

He might stand a chance.

This world was cruel, for forcing Eren to make a choice.

…

This was going to hurt.

Moving away from the exit, Eren felt around the direction of the table and grabbed what he was feeling for- a skull. Diving between the two struggling bodies, Eren felt for hair. Smooth, and thin? No, that was Historia's. Rough and frizzly. *That* was what he was searching for. So, as Historia kept the man's fighting hands busy, Eren yanked on the beard and smashed the skull against the head it was attached to.

"Historia," Eren yelled. "*Run!*"

Eren heard shoes scramble against the floor of the cave and thump away in the direction of the exit. There was a grunt from the below Eren, as his attention remained on Historia who was now getting away. The man tried, dizzily, to stand in an effort to chase.

Not if Eren could help it.

In the total darkness, Eren made a blind grab for the man, and wrapped his hand around *some* part of his body, pulling with all his might. Probably his ankle, judging by the bone that protruded beneath the skin. It was enough to send the man sailing to the ground, and elicit a gasp of pain. Better yet, it was enough to let Historia make a clean getaway as her footsteps disappeared into the forest.

"You!" The man cried, turning his attention onto Eren. Eren was unable to see in the dark, but he was at a disadvantage here- the man knew his way around this space much better than he did, and he stood between Eren and the exit.

And he was pissed.

Eren's hand moved towards his mouth in a knee jerk reaction, but instead of biting, he only pressed his fist to his lips in frustration- he was underground.

In the time it took for Eren to return to square one and think of a plan, the man was already on the move. Eren stumbled backwards, farther than he wanted to be in the cave, so far that the bottom of his spine bumped harshly into the edge of the table.

Something knocked over; he heard it roll. Another skull. For all Eren knew, he was surrounded by remains, and the man responsible was right in front of him.

Eren balled up his fists, having no more room to back up. He was ready to fight, he was ready, even though it was dark. He was the top of his class in close combat, except to Mikasa. He could handle this.

Eren's first punch hit him in the gut. The second? The side of his head. He took a hit to his stomach- but that was okay, because he had grabbed the man's beard and swung him to the side, where he must have stumbled into the chains, because Eren heard them rattle again.

This was it. This was his chance to run out, and reunite with Historia. Levi. Armin and Sasha and hell, he'd even be relieved to see Jean. Then he'd see Mikasa, who'd be fussing like there was no tomorrow. And he would sit there and take it.

But Eren never made it out.

Something cold and heavy flew between his legs, wrapping around his right foot, tripping him, and he fell face-first to the cold bottom of the cave. It was the chains that were strewn over his foot, chains that he felt tighten and pull him back towards the man. Clawing his hands on the ground made no difference as he was wrenched in the opposite direction of the exit, grazing the smooth stone surface.

Eren's feet were out of play as he felt more metal bind his lower legs.

No. *No!* He needed to fight, needed to *win*-

He felt the force of the chains being pulled disappear, and took the chance to curl his legs in to untangle them. Without light, it was next to impossible, and Eren needed to hurry up, and get out before-

Something metal was being dragged over. It was thicker than a sheet of metal, but thinner than a brick. It sang a horrible song as it scraped the ground, the sound helping Eren to identify the object.

There were human remains everywhere around here. Of course he would have a shovel.

Eren didn't know what direction it was going to hit him at. How could he have known it would come from the side and collide with his head, besides the slight breeze that sent his hair sweeping right before contact?

---

Historia had never run so fast in her life.

She kicked up leaves and dirt in her wake. Her hair kept whipping into her mouth and in front of her eyes. Her lungs burned like sandpaper was being rubbed against them, and even though she needed to be quiet in case she was being chased, she gasped like no tomorrow.

Finally, after what felt like forever, she checked behind her. No one was there.

Holy Sina, she needed water.

A creek. There was a creek, with water clean as day flowing through it. Any remaining manners she still had went out the window as she kneeled and cupped water in her hands to gulp down. Sure, it spilled all over herself, but she was already soaking wet.

"Historia?"

Historia yelped at the sound of her name. Walls, she *still* wasn't used to hearing it, especially from her squadmates.

Wait. Armin?

"Armin," Historia cried, "Armin!"

It was Armin, in the flesh, standing over the mess that was Historia Reiss. He held out a hand, to which Historia took greedily and stumbled to her feet. No more words were shared

before she had fallen in for a hug.

“Woah,” Armin said, stunned at how… *unusual* Historia was acting. A weight dropped in his stomach, the feeling that something bad had happened. “What happened?”

Historia shook in her friend’s arms. She was pretty sure tears ran down her cheeks, mixing with the pouring rain.

“Okay,” Armin said to the silence, changing his course of action. “Come with me. You need to dry off.”

Historia walked with Armin, trying to pass on what happened. “There’s this person in a cave. He has Eren.”

Armin stopped short. “What? He has Eren?”

Historia nodded, searching for her next words. “Yes. In a cave. I just escaped, because Eren distracted him, and I *left* him there-”

“It’s not your fault. Eren has a better chance of surviving. He knows that, and you know that,” Armin comforted. “Don’t worry. Come with me. We have to get to shelter.”

Historia started to walk with Armin again. “What if he finds us?”

“I don’t know,” Armin admitted. “I don’t know. Let’s take this one thing at a time, okay?”

Historia took a deep breath. “Right. Okay.”

Upon arriving at Armin and Jean’s makeshift tent, Historia was ecstatic at seeing Jean. A little less so after learning why he was confined to the ground, but happy nonetheless.

Armin quickly gave Jean a rundown of their situation so far, and even Jean felt impending doom at Eren’s disappearance. “Fuck, guys.”

“We just need a plan,” Armin said. “A plan to get to Eren or to find Levi. He’s got to be out there somewhere.”

Historia’s eyes were solemn. “What if he’s not? What if he’s-”

“*Don’t* say dead,” Jean retorted. “He’s not dead. Because if he’s dead, then we’re truly screwed.”

“We’re the weakest two in the 104$^{th}$,” Historia lamented. “There’s no way we can carry you, Jean. I mean no offense, but you’re… really tall.”

“We can’t move,” Armin concluded with gloom. “We’re sitting ducks. We can’t just leave you here, Jean.”

And just like that, melancholy had taken over the group.

“I mean… you *could*,” Jean suggested, inciting an immediate answer from Armin and Historia.

“*No*.”

“Never mind,” Jean muttered.

“Let’s at least wait until it stops raining,” Historia proposed. “We can think about what to do until then.”

---

Down the creek, Levi spotted three teenagers sporting Survey Corps gear. It was a relief, but it was also *only three*. There should have been four of them, safe and sound, keeping each other company until Levi found them. But no, there were only three, and Historia appeared to be in distress from a distance.

Sasha pulled the arm of Levi’s jacket.

“Stop!” She whispered, and Levi immediately saw what she meant.

There the man was, behind a fallen tree. Crouched and out of sight, but at a good vantage point to be spying on Jean, Historia and Armin. Levi did a quick analyzation. The man’s hair was long and dishevelled. There was a knife strapped to his thigh, and blood was splattered on his clothing. It would have been no surprise to Levi considering what they had already discovered, but that blood was fresh.

And Eren was nowhere in sight.

Sasha equipped the rifle, having it readied with a tiny *click*. Levi noted how she shook slightly. Was it because of the chill of the rain? Or the fact that she was about to kill somebody?

Without taking his eyes off the man or changing positions of the gun, Levi slowly gripped the weapon over Sasha’s trembling hands and transferred the weight to himself. The trigger felt like an old friend as his finger graced it, metal smooth to the touch.

Even though Levi knew that sometimes, murder was the only option- he still wanted his horde of brats to not have to know the feeling of being responsible for another’s death. No, they would be spared until another day, and he would simply be adding to his roster.

Knowing that made it a little easier for Levi to step closer to improve his shot.

Even the slightest sound the man could hear, spinning around at first with perseverance and fury, but once seeing the gun, he squandered back, apparently afraid to meet the same fate as so many he had killed.

“I have one question for you,” Levi said, “and if you answer correctly, you just might get to live. Where is the fourth kid?”

It was a bluff. Levi was going to kill this guy either way. But not before finding out why Eren wasn't with the rest of the kids.

"Evil, evil," the man said, running his rotting fingernails down his cheeks. "He's a child of evil!"

That was certainly one way Levi would choose to describe Eren, but no one was allowed to say that but him. "Where. Is. He? Your fucking cave?"

Surprise mixed with anger was painted on the man's face, and he started to furiously shake his head. "No! He's not there! You won't be able to find him!"

"You're bluffing," Levi deadpanned. This man was insane. "Sasha?"

Sasha stared at Levi with wide eyes. "What?"

Levi's eyes zeroed in on the man in line with the gun. "Look away."

Sasha winced at the gunshot, and then again as a body fell to the ground with a *thud*.

Levi held the gun towards Sasha again. "Take this. I really don't think this idiot has anybody else around here."

Sasha's hands only shook a bit when she took the weapon from Levi.

There was a lantern sitting next to the tree, and Levi picked it up with two fingers to avoid touching a large surface area on the handle. This would come in handy, considering how fucking dark it was in his cave.

---

Armin and Jean flinched at the sound of a *bang*. Turning their attention in the direction of the disruption, all three watched a body slump to the ground, and their Captain- and Sasha- standing over it.

Historia remained apathetic to the fact that Levi had just killed him. *Good*. Maybe now, they were safe.

It seemed Levi already knew that the three of them sat beneath the tent, because he walked over with Sasha and a lantern. Relief flooded both sides as Armin and Sasha exchanged a hug, and Historia saluted to Levi.

"We need to get Eren," Historia explained. "He should be in a cave up the creek."

"I've gathered that," Levi said nonchalantly, tossing a look in the direction of the body of the man. "Is there anything else I should know?"

Jean coughed from the ground behind Armin and Historia. "Um. I can't really walk on this ankle."

*This ankle* was exposed to the air. Armin had taken off Jean's boot, and in the meantime, it had swollen up.

"Armin," Levi directed. "You stay here with Jean. Sasha and Historia, come with me. We shouldn't be gone for long."

---

"Stay out here," Levi advised Sasha and Historia. "I'll yell if I want you two to come in."

"Yes, sir," both girls said. Historia's hand was a loose fist on her chest, and Sasha was no less morose. Neither of them knew what Levi would encounter in the cave. But they still watched him enter with the lantern, morbidly curious to know what happened to their friend. To Eren.

Levi no more than rounded the entrance corner when his shoe slipped on a slick liquid on the ground. Levi caught himself, but he could smell it. It permeated the air, the blood, and none of it was here the last time.

Levi held the lantern to where the crimson blood pooling mixed with bits of grey, and followed the short, wide trail to a pair of military-issued boots that hung ten, maybe twenty centimetres off the ground. Levi stood back as he held the lantern, illumination shining on the chains that bound Eren's hands above his head.

His kid hung there, like he was nothing to that terrible, terrible man except his next kill. Or maybe something worse. Maybe the reason Eren wasn't dead yet was because he was saving him for some nefarious-

Levi cleared his mind, electing not to think about what could have been. Instead, he focused on what was. Blood and brains on the floor that could only have been Eren's, because they weren't there before. Eren, hanging, just… *covered* in blood. It soaked his entire shirt and fell down half his face. But it wasn't bleeding anymore.

*Fucking hooray*. One thing to be happy about, Levi supposed. That, and now they knew that Eren could heal from losing parts of his fucking brain. No, Levi did not want to think about this, either.

He needed to get his kid down from there.

No way in hell was he calling in Sasha and Historia now. Instead, there was a chair tucked in against the table he had noticed earlier, with all the soldiers' stamps on it. Levi made a grab for the chair, and-

And paused, because the lantern showed the full extent of this cave. Against the wall of the cave, at the back of the desk, were human skulls. Some were broken. Levi didn't want to know how they died. Didn't want to know if it was the same thing that was done to Eren.

Garrison cloaks were the only décor on the walls. There was a wooden basket, full of random trinkets and gadgets. Levi saw a watch, a ring, somebody's wallet. A pair of glasses.

No. *Nope.* He was done looking. He pushed the chair through the blood until it was close enough to Eren and on solid ground for him to step up on. Hanging the lantern on the side, Levi could use both hands to figure out how to get Eren down.

One of the chains was stuck to a hook in the ceiling. That was the one Levi needed to release. He gripped the links in the chain beside the one on the hook and lifted slowly. Once the chain was off the hook, his muscles demanded he let go all at once, but he steadily lowered Eren down onto the ground like a puppeteer, ever so gentle. The chains were bound to Eren's wrists, and they made everything heavier.

But Eren was no longer hanging from his arms. Levi *knew* that had to have hurt. Luckily, it seemed as though Eren was unconscious since he healed from whatever trauma was inflicted upon him.

Levi didn't let go of the chain while he stepped off the chair carefully onto the slippery floor.

There was no key; these weren't shackles. There was instead a large knot that Levi had to untie, and he couldn't judge how long it would take, so he decided to settle on the ground. To settle in the pool of blood and other general secretions Eren would have lost from having his skull bashed in. Levi pulled Eren up from underneath his arms so that his head rested on Levi's lap, calm and unknowing to the disturbing surroundings around them. Then, he began unlooping the chain links from around Eren's hands.

It was good, though, how Eren's head had healed already. And Levi was still stricken by the extent of an injury that Eren could heal from, as he pulled and twisted at the metal bindings until the knot was loose enough for Eren's hands to slide out.

"Oi." Levi spoke lowly, as to not surprise Eren, but still enough to try and wake him up. "Eren. To get you out of here I'm going to stand you up."

At his name, Eren hummed from whatever subconscious realm he was currently in. Levi sighed, giving him a little shake. He took Eren's arm, now free from the chains, and used his sleeve to wipe off some of the dried blood that was across his face. That was better.

He was going to have to bring Eren outside anyhow. The brats would see what a mess he was either way.

"…What?" Eren mumbled, blinking his eyes open. At first, he stared into space, and Levi became nervous that maybe Eren's head *hadn't* healed, and that there would be lasting injuries, because that was exactly the kind of luck they had in the Survey Corps.

But eventually, Eren focused on Levi in the dimly lit cave, staring at him upside down in minor confusion. "Captain?"

"Yes," Levi said. "It's me, brat. Let's get you out of this hellhole."

Levi stood up first, and pulled Eren up with a hand around his back. He cast the other's arm around his shoulders, and although slow, Eren was able to take a step beside Levi. It was slow and staggered, but it was a step.

“Good,” Levi commented. “Just keep doing that.”

They left the cave behind more with every step, and when they were near the entrance, Levi let the lantern fall from around his wrist and clatter to the ground. The noise had to have alerted Sasha and Historia, because they both stood alert outside the cave, eyes immediately landing on Eren.

“There’s another beaten path, sir,” Sasha said stoically, surprising Levi with her ability to stomach the sight of so much blood. Yet, he so often forgot that these brats were trained soldiers that had already been through hell and back.

Still, that didn’t make it right.

“Historia,” Levi ordered, taking her attention from Eren to him. “Help me carry Eren. Sasha, I need you to go help Armin bring Jean back here. This is most likely the way to the road at the bottom of the ravine.”

Sasha nodded and wordlessly left in the direction the creek flowed. Distantly, Levi thought of their horse that he had tied to a tree at the top of the ravine. He would have to make a separate trip to get it back, but only until all the brats were under a roof and dry.

“Captain Levi,” Historia asked, “how can I help?”

Historia was more use than she believed herself to be, because she was the perfect stature to be able to take Eren’s other arm around her shoulders at the same height as Levi.

It took some time for Sasha, Armin and Jean to return and for the group to head along the path that would hopefully lead to the main road. Jean’s slow pace matched Eren’s, so neither felt at fault for the lackadaisical speed they were keeping. Every now and then, Jean would shoot Eren a look with an indiscernible expression. It didn’t take long for Levi to notice with the way he was keeping tabs on everybody’s state like a hawk.

The five of them walked, soaking wet, slowly but surely up the path. Looking like a crew of eccentrics, no doubt, with one of them hopping every other step and another dead on their feet.

The main road soon made itself known.

“We keep walking,” Levi ordered, leading the grungy group in the direction towards the training base; the initial direction they were headed in the first place. He could retrieve the horse when they were all safe and dry.

---

They were walking for about an hour before they heard the clops of a horse and saw a wagon approaching.

“Hop on in!” Hange called, waving from the horse pulling the wagon. “Happy to see me, Levi?”

“Whatever,” Levi muttered, stepping into the back of the wagon with Eren and Historia, disregarding Hange's pesky greeting. He was not in the mood. Hange would see why, when seeing their beaten and battered states.

Pulling back the curtain, Levi was surprised to see someone already in there- a concerned brunette.

“Eren!” Mikasa cried, immediately moving to assist Eren in sitting down. He tried to wave her off and just sit against the wooden side of the wagon, but it was exhausting to resist the hands that made moving his body just a little easier.

Eren changed his mind immediately upon Mikasa’s touch. Leaning against her meant body heat. It gave him warmth, which was something he hadn’t had all damn day.

Mikasa didn’t ask a single question, which was good, because Eren didn’t want to answer any. Somehow, that she knew.

The ride to the training base was bumpy, but Eren dozed off with his head on Mikasa’s shoulder. She leant against him as well. Not a word was said in the wagon, which was fine for everyone, who huddled to keep warm. Levi decided to keep his mouth shut for now, too, even though he had a shit ton of incident reports to draft later.

Once they arrived, everybody entered the cabin in pairs. Sasha held up Jean, and would be embarking on a mission to find a set of crutches somewhere on the property. Levi would have to remind her to get some rest, too.

Historia and Armin followed closely behind, sharing the same cloak to keep warm in. Connie was inside, and would be on towel supply duty to help everyone clean off.

Eren and Mikasa were next, with Hange and Levi picking up the back end.

“Clean up and get some rest, Eren,” Levi ordered. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” Eren retorted sleepily, not hiding the giant sigh that escaped right after.

Mikasa wrapped her arm around Eren’s back as they ascended the stairs one by one. She moved slowly for Eren’s sake, who was still lethargic. They got to the bedrooms, and Eren flopped onto a bed and let every bone in his body take a break. It was well deserved.

“I’ll be right back,” Mikasa said, resting her hand on Eren’s shoulder, then leaving the room. She returned moments later with a pail of water and cloth, only to find Eren sound asleep.

Mikasa sat on the bed anyway, next to Eren. She had wrung out the cloth so nothing dripped from the fabric, then deemed it dry enough to wipe away the blood on Eren’s head.

Beneath the blood was a face she knew and loved. She kept going until there wasn’t a speck of blood left, not in his hair, not anywhere.

*This world was cruel.*

But it was kind, too.

---

Levi was standing in the doorway. Who knew how long he had been there for.

“Tch,” he said. “Good job. He was a fucking mess.”

“We couldn’t have had that,” Mikasa replied, sass in between her words. “What do you need, captain?”

“To make sure everything was fine. I *was* going to watch the brat, but if you want to instead, be my guest.”

Mikasa spared Eren a glance. “I think I’ll stay here.”

“Then I’m off,” Levi said, his gaze lingering on the two of his squad. “Don’t get into any trouble.”

Levi left them to it. He had absolutely no worries that anything would happen to Eren with Mikasa there with him.

When the captain descended the stairs, he was face to face with another one of his brats.

“Well, Kirstein? What do you want, me to carry your ass upstairs?”

“No, sir! I was just- I wanted to know how Mikasa was doing. Doing with Eren.”

“He’ll be fine. Why?”

Jean gulped and scratched at his neck with the hand that wasn’t relying on his crutch. “Historia told me how he gave her the chance to escape. I guess I wanted to…” Jean’s face made a weird grimace. “Nevermind.”

“To see if he was okay?” Levi filled in. “He is, brat. He’s with Mikasa. You should be more worried about yourself. Go and elevate your foot. I’ll see about getting you some ice.”

Jean gave a one-handed salute. “Yes, sir.”

Levi watched as Jean hobbled away down the hall. The brats were certainly less argumentative after a near death experience.

Connie hollered a welcome at Jean once he entered the common room. “Jean! I heard your Karnöffel game got cut short! Come play!”

Stupid brats. They should be cleaning, not playing cards.

A memory flashed through his mind. Cards, littered across the ravine, covered in mud. Not a single person in sight.

Perhaps it was fine, for now.

End Notes

should I start a series called n number of ways to carry eren jaeger???

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!